

Philippines: Hidden patterns of torture

The case of five death row inmates who reported they were tortured to confess to the murder of former police intelligence officer, Rolando Abadilla, illustrates a fundamental failure in the protection of human rights and a pattern of torture of criminal suspects in the Philippines, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

At least six of the nine suspects originally arrested in the Rolando Abadilla case, which is currently on appeal before the Supreme Court, alleged they were tortured to confess, and denied access to lawyers, medical attention or family members.

Cesar Fortuna described to Amnesty International how he was blindfolded, doused with water, and with a wet towel placed over his face and mouth, subjected to electro-shocks. Like other suspects in the case, Cesar Fortuna recounted how he was also nearly suffocated with a plastic bag placed repeatedly over his head and held tightly at the neck.

Today, the long-hidden practice of torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects by police has become more apparent, highlighting the flaws in legal and procedural safeguards that has allowed torture to continue unchecked.

President Joseph Estrada has responded to public frustration at rising levels of crime by pledging to get tough on criminals. In this context, Amnesty International fears that torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects could increase further. Under pressure to solve crimes, police are not deterred from using torture as a "short-cut" to extract confessions and secure convictions. It appears that public opinion is prepared to accept such interrogation methods.

The wider pattern of physical and psychological torture and ill-treatment by police includes the beating of suspects as they are arrested, mostly without warrants; the denial of legal counsel, medical or family visits; and the use of torture, including physical assaults, death threats, electro-shocks and suffocation.

The poorest and most marginalized members of society, mainly adult male criminal suspects but including women (especially suspected prostitutes), street children and drug users, are particularly vulnerable.

"At risk is the fundamental dignity of every Philippine citizen, as enshrined in the Philippine Constitution," Amnesty International said. "The use of testimonies extracted through torture undermines the fair trial process and the danger of executing an innocent person is real."

Ahead of the launch of its global Campaign Against Torture next week, Amnesty International is calling on the Philippines government to publicly declare that torture and ill-treatment by police must never be tolerated, and to launch a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into the Rolando Abadilla torture allegations and all other reports of torture in police custody.

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For a copy of the report "Philippines: The Rolando Abadilla murder inquiry - an urgent need for effective investigation of torture" please call Amnesty International in Manila on +63 2 927 6008 or visit www.amnesty.org For comment, call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5729.

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